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# **The Influence of Confucianism on Para-sport activism**

## **Abstract**

Academics and sport organisations have recently recognised Para-sport as a powerful platform for disability activism. However, little attention has been given to Para-sport activism in non-Western cultures. This study explored the influence of Confucianism on South Korean Para-sport activism. Data were collected through interviews conducted with four stakeholders from the Korea Paralympic Committee and eighteen Para-athletes. Through a reflexive thematic analysis, we crafted five themes corresponding with Confucian values: position hierarchy, age hierarchy, parent-child relationship, factionalism, and collectivism. All values had the capacity to encourage and discourage participants towards engaging in activism. These findings contribute to the field of sport sociology by highlighting a multitude of cultural factors affecting Para-sport activism. Practical suggestions to promote Para-sport activism are offered, including sociocultural and organisational legacy.

**Key words:** disability sport; athlete activism; Cultural Sport Psychology; Confucianism; South Korea

## 1    **Introduction**

2            Para-sport activism is gaining attention around the world due to the potential of disabled elite athletes  
3 to highlight forms of oppression that disabled people experience, such as negative attitudes, inaccessible  
4 environments, or social exclusion (see Haslett & Smith, 2020). In Para sport research, *disability* is increasingly  
5 conceptualised towards a social model (i.e., disabled people are limited not by their impairment but by the  
6 environment) or a human rights model (i.e., disability as a rightful part of human diversity), in contrast to a medical  
7 model understanding (i.e., disability is the lack of ability due to impairment) (Smith & Bundon, 2017). Here we  
8 follow Smith, Bundon, and Best (2016) in defining Para-sport activism as action taken by disabled elite athletes  
9 or Para-sport organisations to challenge the oppression of disabled people, both within and outside sport contexts.  
10 A number of recent academic works are now available on Para-sport activism (see Braye, 2016; Bundon & Clark,  
11 2015; Choi, Haslett, & Smith, 2019; Haslett, Choi & Smith, 2020; Haslett, Monforte, Choi, & Smith, 2020; Haslett  
12 & Smith, 2020; Smith, Bundon & Bust, 2016). Moreover, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC, 2019)  
13 has developed an agenda to use Para-sport as a platform to advocate for disability rights. Despite this increasing  
14 interest around the topic, there remain important shortcomings in what we know about Para-sport activism. For  
15 instance, the IPC emphasises that the voices of both disabled elite athletes and Para-sport organisations, such as  
16 National Paralympic Committees (NPC) need to be considered, yet most of previous research has paid exclusive  
17 attention to ‘current disabled elite athletes’ as the sole agents of Para-sport activism. Acknowledging these NPC  
18 members’ perspective is critical because, through their positional advantage, they have a powerful impact on  
19 planning, organising and directing the Para-sport movement (Patatas, De Bosscher, Derom, & De Rycke, 2020).  
20 Likewise, empirical evidence about Para-sport activism has been circumscribed to the Western culture, and little  
21 is known on the realities of non-Western countries. The present study addresses such gaps by considering the  
22 credible voices of South Korean disabled elite athletes *and* Korea Paralympic Committee (KPC) board members.  
23 In what follows below, we describe our theoretical approach, which led us to define the research questions.

## 24    **Theoretical approach and research questions**

25            The cultural frame in which Para-sport activism unfolds matters deeply because culture shapes self-  
26 identity such as how we think, feel, and behave (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Even though ignoring the cultural  
27 dimension is to miss a key matter that shapes Para-sport activism, in this field of research cultural influences seem  
28 to be a by-product rather than a focus. If considering studies based on Western countries (e.g., Bundon & Clark,

2015; Haslett et al., 2020), for example, the cultural gap is moderate, and naturalistic generalisations (those reached on the basis of recognition of similarities to the results with which the reader is familiar) are feasible (Smith, 2018). However, South Korean culture possesses different cultural elements. Given the absence of knowledge on the South Korean context, acknowledging the cultural perspective seems relevant and timely. Following this reasoning, we adopted a Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) approach. A CSP approach emphasises different cultural values (e.g., how people think and interact with other people) and personal meanings in social interactions, from decontextualised knowledge to new perspectives (McGannon & Smith, 2015; Schinke et al., 2019). Thus, CSP plays a crucial role in understanding athletes' identity construction as a social process that constitutes and shapes an individual, not only as one that provides external meaning (McGannon & Smith, 2015). In this study, CSP initially felt adequate for the study design. Progressively, though, it acted as a sensitising approach. Namely, it encouraged deeper consideration for the influence of cultural values and pushed us to consider what makes South Korea a unique cultural context.

One of the key cultural element that makes a difference in how people approach social interaction in South Korea is Confucianism, a core philosophical system advocating group harmony with hierarchical order for political, social, and family relations (Sleziak, 2014). Confucianism has been dominant in South Korea for thousands of years, reflecting not only what identity people have but also outlining how people should behave in certain contexts, including disability, sport, and activism (Choi, 2005; Choi et al., 2019; Sleziak, 2014). Against this backdrop, the present research focuses on the following questions: 1) Which values and features of the Confucianism philosophy have been adopted in Para-sport? and 2) How did these factors act as motivators and barriers to engage in activism?

## **Methods**

### *Design*

Given our need to understand cultural praxis, we adopted a qualitative design, which aligns with the CSP genre (McGannon & Smith, 2015). Our qualitative research was underpinned by ontological relativism (i.e., reality is multifaceted and dependent on an individual's consciousness) and epistemological constructionism (i.e., knowledge is subjective and constructed through inter-dependent relationship) (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In line with CSP approach, this design informed our research questions and methodology, as well as allowed us

1 appreciating how the research participants draw upon cultural meanings and social norms to construct their  
2 subjective perceptions on activism. Thus, we considered reality and knowledge as multifaceted and constructed  
3 through interaction, rather than considering reality and knowledge as being independent of a researcher's purpose  
4 (Smith & Caddick, 2012).

#### 6 *Participants*

7         After gaining University ethical approval, we contacted the KPC to recruit disabled adults who were  
8 either (a) current disabled elite athletes or (b) KPC board members. Participants varied for age, gender, impairment  
9 type, education-level, hometown, and sport types. Prior to their participation, we obtained their informed consent  
10 and told them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The current disabled elite  
11 athletes group (aged between 22 and 56 years; 1 female and 17 males) included 18 elite athletes who either  
12 represented South Korea in international-level Para-sport games (e.g., Pyeong-Chang Paralympic games 2018,  
13 Rio Paralympic games 2016, and Indonesia 2018 Asian Para games) or planned to represent South Korea in Tokyo  
14 Paralympic games 2020. Disabled elite athletes were purposively selected based on activism orientation scores  
15 measured in a previous study (Choi, Haslett & Smith, 2019). The KPC group (aged between 53 and 63 years; 1  
16 female and 3 males) included four active board KPC members who represented South Korea in international-level  
17 Para-sport games when they were younger as former athletes. On average, the KPC members were 20 years older  
18 ( $M = 56.75$ ,  $SD = 4.11$  years) than the current disabled elite athletes ( $M = 36.17$ ,  $SD = 8.55$  years).

#### 19 *Data collection*

20         The first author, non-disabled, female, and 27 years old, collected the data by conducting interviews.  
21 All interviews were conducted face-to-face at an accessible location of the participant's preference (e.g., a café  
22 near their house, participant's home, their workplace). At all times, she maintained a critical and transformative  
23 position whereby the rights of disabled participants were prioritised and kept questioning her own notion of  
24 normalcy (Brighton & Williams, 2018). Also, she paid attention to being sensitive when asking personal questions,  
25 even when asking about topics that may have not seemed sensitive in nature, with the aim to put participants at  
26 ease and encourage honest responses (Brighton & Williams, 2018). An interview guide was crafted before  
27 interviews began. Questions included, "From a Confucianism point of view, what motivates (demotivates) you to  
28 do activism?". Some questions were tailored to each group according to their distinctive features. For example,

the current disabled elite athletes were asked, “What do you think about elite athletes’ status in the disability society?”. The KPC members were asked their two different perspectives of former athletes and KPC board members on Para-sport activism, such as “Could you share your experiences of activism when you were an elite athlete compared to now as KPC board member?”. Each interview (lasting approximately two hours) was recorded and then transcribed verbatim. In order to protect the identity of the participants, sensitive information was removed from the transcripts and each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

### *Data analysis*

We (one female Asian and three male Europeans, all non-disabled) conducted a reflexive thematic analysis in six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Asian cultural background could be thought to generate an ingrained cultural bias. However, this background fostered critical thinking ensuring sensitivity to cultural diversity. The European authors generated additional critical insights and developed an enriched understanding (Smith & McGannon, 2018). In terms of how this analysis was done, we firstly familiarised ourselves with the data (e.g., reading the transcripts multiple times and noting down initial ideas or patterns). Second, we generated codes from data that appeared to contain interesting features in relation to the research purpose. All codes were determined through a semantic approach (e.g., within explicit or surface meanings). Third, we clustered codes at the level of themes (e.g., sorting all data relevant codes into potential themes) and then we identified candidate themes and sub-themes. Fourth, we reviewed our themes to form a coherent pattern and created themes within internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Fifth, we generated clear definitions for each theme and clarified how each theme fits into the overall story of the research data. Finally, we produced a report by writing our thematic analysis, intending to provide a logical, coherent, non-repetitive, and interesting story.

### *Rigour: Ongoing list of criteria for judging the quality of the research*

Regarding the issue of rigour, we used a ‘characterising traits’ approach, whereby evaluative criteria for rigor/trustworthiness were viewed as contingent on epistemology, methods, study aims, and context (Burke, 2016). In consonance, we elaborated on an ongoing list of criteria (see the essential points in Table 1). In order to elaborate and refine the criteria that constitute the list, we carried out the following tasks. First, we discussed the latest debates about how relativist research might be judged (e.g., Smith and McGannon, 2018). Second, we reviewed and drew inspiration from the work of other qualitative scholars who have conducted similar forms of inquiry. Following from this, we formulated a provisional list that we consulted and re-evaluated until we reached a satisfactory perception of the quality of the study. To avoid self-indulgence, our perception was critically

contrasted with the existing literature.

## **Results**

We crafted five themes that correspond to traditional or cardinal Confucian values, called: a) position hierarchy, b) age hierarchy, c) parent-child relationship, d) factionalism and e) collectivism. These values were present in participants' voices, affecting what they are able to say and how they say it. Importantly, Confucian values played an ambivalent role in the participants, both motivators and barriers towards activism. To clarify participants' multifaceted perspectives, we considered three-voice categories. The 'current athletes' voice category refers to the voices of disabled elite athletes who are currently active in the sports field. The 'former athletes' voice category refers to the voices of the KPC members thinking back when they were athletes in the past. The 'KPC members' voice category refers to the voices of the current active board members of KPC. As a caveat, it has to be acknowledged that such voice categories are an artificial distinction made to provide a report as clear and structured as possible. Participants talk through a single voice, but this voice is not unitary and total. Rather, it contains a plurality of consciousness and voices, whether inner voices from the past or external voices from other people. As Bakhtin (1987) put it, our utterances are 'filled with others' words' (p. 89), 'with echoes and reverberations of other utterances' (p. 91). This means, for instance, that the voice of a KPC members contains not just the voice of the current KPC members, but also that of the former athlete they used to be, as voice is always formed in an ongoing process of anticipation and response to other voices.

### ***Position hierarchy***

The first theme representing Confucian influence on Para-sport activism was position hierarchy. This can be explained through one of the five cardinal relationships in Confucianism about the bond between ruler and subjects (Korean; 군신유의, Chinese; 君臣有義). Literally, this means that the subjects should respect the ruler as superior, and that the ruler should be the subjects' role model (Yum, 1988). However, only the former element—the subject's 'loyalty' to the ruler—is emphasised nowadays.

Around thirty years ago, social prejudice against disabled athletes was such that they were viewed as a 'lower' class and less worthy than non-disabled people and, which meant that they were considered simply as 'disabled' and not as 'athletes'. With the hosting of the 1988 Paralympics in South Korea, some disabled athletes

1 began to speak out against the unfair treatment. However, when engaging in activism they experienced a diverse  
2 range of offensive circumstances. For example, highly placed people in the 1980s considered disabled athlete  
3 activism as a nuisance and an interference in their work. This dismissive attitude limited the room for improvement  
4 and discouraged disabled athletes from speaking out for their rights. As one former athlete said:

5       People could be excluded if they were against high-level people (government or non-disabled sports  
6       organisation). ‘You know what happens when you don’t listen’, then it was sorted out. All the process  
7       seemed like the logic of power, its hierarchy. It was not a discussion between people, but they spoke in  
8       a threatening tone [Former athlete, Sung-Gyu]

9       Exceptionally, one former athlete commented that he was motivated to engage in activism in response  
10      to what he perceived to be a corrupted hierarchical culture during his athletic career in South Korea. In the 1980s  
11      key people attempted to exclude him from his athletic position because he had opposite opinions to theirs. The  
12      inequitable treatment created an implacable resolution to engage in activism. During that period, former athletes  
13      believed that only medallists had the opportunity and responsibility to meet decision-makers (e.g., politicians) and  
14      speak out for social changes in front of them. As one former athlete said:

15      Politicians or people who work at the government don’t like people who raise problems or do activism  
16      in the hierarchical country. So high-status people try to exclude activists. This was a big motivation to  
17      get a medal and speak out directly to them with an indomitable spirit. Thus, I had never missed  
18      opportunities to be a national elite athlete for 12 years. I did my best to get a medal all the time. Why?  
19      Because I want to speak out for our rights and movement. I knew that there was a special luncheon with  
20      medallists at Blue House (Korean Presidential residence) before the match. Thus, I was invited to  
21      luncheon, and could tell directly to president Noh, ‘We need this improvement with your support.’  
22      [Former athlete, In-Sung]

23      Nowadays, negative social prejudices against disability have abated, and discriminative treatments  
24      against Paralympians have lessened. Due to this change, disabled elite athletes are currently seen as ‘elite athletes’  
25      rather than ‘disabled people’ and, in turn, are given a higher status than disabled non-athletes within the disability  
26      society (Choi, Haslett, & Smith, 2019). However, within the narrower Para-sport system—established in 2005  
27      with the formation of KPC and dominated by disabled and non-disabled board members—disabled elite athletes  
28      occupy a low position. Given their two-sided condition, we found that some disabled elite athletes with a strong



1 activist identity took advantage of their power on diverse social and political issues, but they had difficulty to  
2 engage in sport-based activism because this might be deemed disrespectful by KPC group. As one current athlete  
3 said:

4 I'm not the decision-maker yet. I think it will be possible if I get in a high position that can decide. I  
5 don't know how far it is, but without rights of decision-making, I can't change anything and structure a  
6 new frame. As I said before, when I put different opinions from others, people would accept mine as a  
7 wrong one. It will make me hard to keep going to engage in activism within the Para-sport context. I  
8 couldn't explain all the things around me more logically. This is culture. We have never learnt, but we  
9 know this [Current athlete, Yun-Young]

11 The high status afforded by being a 'board member' in the KPC was identified as a source of motivation  
12 to engage in activism, since it provided access to the decision-making process. In this sense, the activism of the  
13 KPC members, even when small in extent, had a strong practical influence on society, since it facilitated the  
14 introduction of a comprehensive set of policies and practices, and helped integrate the world of business and the  
15 government into the movement. As one KPC member said:

16 I can get attention from people now because I am a board member. I have the advantage to change  
17 society even more because my position is close to politicians. That's why I tried to reach this position,  
18 and made a lot of changes. This status has a tremendous advantage because I can meet and explain  
19 directly to politicians, ministers, members of the National Assembly, and even president. [KPC member,  
20 In-Sung]

## 21 *Age hierarchy*

22 A second theme representing Confucian influence on Para-sport activism was age hierarchy. This is  
23 reflected in another of the five cardinal relationships in Confucianism, that is the bond between older and younger  
24 brothers (Korean: 장유유서; Chinese: 長幼有序). Historically this bond meant that there is order and sequences  
25 from childhood (younger brother) to adulthood (older brother) according to biological age (Yum, 1988). However,  
26 today this relationship has degenerated in a way that younger people should now be expected to follow and respect  
27 older people, even if the age gap is slight. Thus, to be an older person is in South Korea deemed an advantage in

1 terms of exercising one's rights to speak their own opinions related to social change in general. Age hierarchy  
2 also applied to Para-sport. In this study, one current athlete-activist suggested his experiences of activism were  
3 stifled by older KPC members because of his relatively young age. Another athlete-activist set forth his divergent  
4 opinions against senior people, but he believed they ignored his opinions and considered him to be an impertinent  
5 person with an antagonistic position. The tacit cultural age hierarchy in Para-sport became a motivator for senior  
6 people, but also discouragement for young current disabled athletes to do activism. As two current athletes said:

7 Because I am an athlete and 24 years old. I am still too young to speak out for social change. In South  
8 Korea, senior people think young people don't know anything. That's why I didn't speak my opinion. I  
9 am scared that they make a kind of hierarchy. For example, when I made a small mistake against them,  
10 they shout away noisily because I am young [Current athlete, Ho-Yeon]

11 South Korea is a kind of country that if people who aged 30's speak against people aged 50's, the elderly  
12 people say, 'He is arrogant' and 'He is a jerk'. I am just talking about my opinion. That's why I hide my  
13 opinions to avoid this situation. I won't say anything even though I want to speak out. I just spoke my  
14 opinions, but they said, 'He has no manners at all when he talks', I am talking about looking at it from  
15 a different angle, but they just hate me [Current athlete, Sung-Hoon]

16 Interestingly, current young disabled athletes strongly appealed against the negative impact of this  
17 cardinal value of Confucianism on engagement in activism, whereas few KPC members (seniors) suggested that  
18 a more strict and rigorous Confucian custom (e.g., social hierarchy) is needed in South Korean Para-sport. As a  
19 distinct example of generation gap, each generation in South Korean culture has a different perspective towards  
20 the meaning of 'polite'. The KPC members expressed that lower-level groups (e.g., related to age) should respect  
21 and follow senior people all the time by sticking to an old tradition and practices in Para-sport culture, whereas  
22 current disabled athletes demonstrated respecting board members only on the condition of that they ensured an  
23 appropriate level of human-rights protection. As one KPC member said:

24 Nowadays, there are a lot of rude, young troublemakers. I think we need more [age] hierarchy in sports  
25 field at least. Now it is like disorder or chaos. I think athletes should be more polite and respect seniors  
26 and board member. I think it is necessary that they should feel uncomfortable when talking to a senior.  
27 Few years ago, we lived in such a strong hierarchical culture. Of course, I am not saying that hierarchy  
28 is correct. But now it can be a problem of human rights if I punish people or shout at them when they

1 make a mistake or did something wrong. Now it can be physical assault if I flicked people on their  
2 forehead with my finger or hit their head with my fist. Confucian culture is followed less and less [...]  
3 So, there is no such thing (hierarchy and respect to seniors). Thus, I made compliance (rule) at the training  
4 centre. If any elite athletes, even potential medallists, break the rules I set, they will be excluded from  
5 the national team. No matter how good they are [KPC member, Sang-In]

### 6 *Parent-child relationship*

7 A third theme representing Confucian influence on Para-sport activism was the parent-child  
8 relationship. In this research, both current and former disabled athletes insisted on the importance of their  
9 parents' support for them to engage (or not) in sport and activism by sharing negative family environmental  
10 experiences. Culturally in South Korea, this can be interpreted partly through one of the five cardinal  
11 relationships in Confucianism describing the bond between father and son (noted that traditionally women are  
12 not considered in this cardinal factor) (Korean; 부자유친, Chinese; 父子有親) (Yum, 1988). In the past, this  
13 bond signified a relationship in which the son always had to follow and support the opinion of his father. Today,  
14 it is reinterpreted in a broader way: children – irrespective of sex or gender - should follow both their parents'  
15 lead. Because of this, parents' attitude has a tremendous influence on identity formation and behaviour of their  
16 children. Our analysis suggests a cross-generational parental influence on athlete-activism orientation (see  
17 Figure 1). On the one hand, some parents engaged in activism through gathering information on disability and  
18 involvement in advocacy (Poon-McBrayer & McBrayer, 2004). These parent's behaviour helped shape an  
19 activist orientation in their disabled children and later for them to become a disabled athlete-activist.

20 On the other hand, other parents embraced the historically traditional social prejudice against disability  
21 in South Korea (people view disability as a family misfortune due to ancestors' sins). With the strong influence  
22 of parents and negative social prejudices, the parents led them to keep their children mostly within the home  
23 growing up. The confinement of their disabled children was interpreted as having two different purposes: a)  
24 overprotection for their disabled children, and b) stigma associated with disability. Some disabled athletes  
25 (children) had been unwillingly subjugated to the values of their parents, and any act of rebellion against their  
26 parents was considered aberrant. For example, one athlete stopped his activist behaviours because of his parents'  
27 shame of having a disabled child. These parents were worried that if anyone knew of the existence of a disabled  
28 son in their family this would result in family social stigma and public shame. Family is the smallest unit and a

1 microcosm of South Korean society, but children's (athlete) rights have historically been disregarded, even  
2 within their family. Such disregard is manifested in how parents physically hinder and engender psychological  
3 pain in their children, which in turn, maybe became a huge discouragement for the children to engage in activism.

4 As one current athlete and one former athlete said:

5 Young children do not have a prejudice towards disability. Instead adults are too biased. Even my parents  
6 and relatives prevented me to engage in work, activism, and athletic life. They used to say 'You are  
7 disabled. Where can you go, what can you do? Stay inside and take care of yourself at home. Don't go  
8 outside. Don't get sicker. Don't do anything in front of people.' It was very hard to change their  
9 perceptions towards disability [Former athlete, In-Sung]

10 I think parents of disabled athletes can be a huge barrier (for activism). For example, there was a case  
11 of a former sledge athlete. He gave up the life of elite athlete because of his parents. His parents  
12 mentioned that they felt embarrassed about their child's disability. South Koreans are always conscious  
13 of other people around them. Elite athletes are exposed to the media, so they show their disability.  
14 Activism is also the same context. Parents don't want to tell others that their child is disabled. They are  
15 ashamed of their child [Current athlete, Chang-Seong]

16 [Please insert Figure.1 about here]

## 17 ***Factionalism***

18 A fourth theme representing Confucian influence on Para-sport activism was a strong factionalism. In  
19 South Korea factionalism was created by a concept identified through the word *Yongo*(연고), composed of two  
20 words, 'yon (tie)' and 'go (having a reason)' (Horak, 2014). Yongo refers to personal relationships in an  
21 informally-organised group. This relation is made of three 'ties': *Hakyon* (학연: education-based tie), *Hyulyon*  
22 (혈연: family or blood-based tie), and *Jiyon* (지연: regional origin-based tie). Based on South Korean factionalism,  
23 three *Yongo* have become closely intertwined with social movement and activism. People in relationships formed  
24 by a common *Yongo* basis became stalwart supporters of one another for their further achievement (e.g., social  
25 change, development of Para-sport) by securing benefits granted through such ties, rather than based on equal  
26 treatment. In this study, KPC members emphasised that strong informal connection with decision-makers was the

1 most important factor to obtain a powerful voice and thus achieve many benefits (e.g., career progression, securing  
2 rights, receiving subsidies). They acknowledged that factionalism helped them achieve a high position in Para-  
3 sport. As one KPC member said:

4 When someone wants to change society with a political approach such as budget or government policy,  
5 they cannot do anything if they don't have personal connections and networks through university and  
6 hometown. [...] There are lines according to same faction, band... for example, same university, same  
7 hometown etc. [...] If someone makes a personal connection through acquaintances or similar  
8 background, the people listen once more. I was good at doing this with people. It was helpful in order  
9 to be positioned here [KPC member, In-Sung]

10  
11 However, factionalism was also perceived as a strong discouragement to engage in activism by some  
12 current athletes who belonged to weaker factions. In the data, multiple factions coexisted in Para-sport. Among  
13 these factions, one was perceived to hold a major influence on society and to dominate by 'pushing aside' others  
14 to expand their power. For example, one current athlete stood up to defend his rights against a different faction.  
15 Therefore, he was ostracised by people (e.g., KPC members and few athletes) who belonged to the rival faction  
16 and was excluded from the national team as a form of retaliation he believed. He told that other athletes who  
17 graduated from the same university as the board members were granted a place in the national team instead of  
18 him. As he said:

19 I have got on the wrong side of the board members by saying opposite opinion with them. A game  
20 participation is only available for disabled who have disability level 1.0, but they raised my disability  
21 level to 1.5 when I was selected as the national team even though my level was evaluated as 1.0 in the  
22 international disability ranking system. In the sense of retaliation for not being on the same faction, board  
23 members gave their people (athletes), who have same direction or obey them, a favourable class for  
24 qualification for Paralympic. And they prevented other athletes who are opposite side to participate in  
25 the Paralympics. Surviving here is very hard. I think they are on a serious power trip lining their own  
26 pocket or rice bowls (Korean staple food) [Current athlete, Yeong-Hwan]

27 Few current disabled athletes maintained discretion about their faction and avoided to be embroiled in disputes  
28 between factions because they feared repercussions from superior factions. This led to silence on social injustice.

1 Everyone has their own opinion, and someone can have a different opinion against me. But others think  
2 'He is not from the same faction', and 'He is opposite to me' rather than understanding each other. This  
3 was very a huge reason I couldn't have my own opinion. Even though the line has power now, this line  
4 can be a rotten rope if it became degenerate. But if I already got this line, and the senior got sack for  
5 some reasons, I may lose my future [Current athlete, Dae-Won]

6 Interestingly, factionalism hindrance was also suggested by KPC members. For example, one KPC  
7 member, who oversaw one disability sports organisation, was considered a high-status person within the South  
8 Korean Para-sport system, felt his voice had occasionally been disregarded because he belonged to a different  
9 faction, one that was opposed to the faction to which another KPC board member—who held 'more power' in  
10 disability sports—belonged. As he said:

11 I am against other KPC members. Because I know about reality so much, other board members don't  
12 like my voice (behaviour). I have been at the forefront for social change, but now it is not good timing.  
13 I cannot be a good person if I say my opinion against key people. Other board members who disagree  
14 with me sit at a higher level than me. They may not like me and ignore my voice [KPC member, Sung-  
15 Gyu]

## 16 ***Collectivism***

17 A fifth theme representing Confucian influence on Para-sport activism was collectivism, which means  
18 a "social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as part of one or more collectives"  
19 in South Korea (Triandis, 1995). Each individual belonged simultaneously to two different types of collectivism  
20 (e.g., Choi, Haslett, & Smith, 2019): a) horizontal (e.g., seeing oneself as being similar to others and highlighting  
21 common goals), and b) vertical (e.g., being loyal to one's group and adhering to hierarchical interpersonal  
22 relations). The current athletes belonged to two groups: the 'athlete group' (more horizontal collectivism) and the  
23 'Para-sport group' (more vertical collectivism). The former encouraged activism by promoting harmony and  
24 cooperation among athletes, whereas the latter discouraged activism as it could have repercussions from high-  
25 status board members. This was because of the tendency of high-status board members to see an individual's  
26 behaviour as a group identity. This could be also interpreted by a *Woo-ri* approach.

27 The word '*Woo-ri*' (우리) translates to 'we' in English but is used as an alternative form of 'I' in Korean

linguistic. This word reflects the strong collectivist identity that is engrained in the Korean language. While in many Western cultures people orient themselves towards a self that distinguishes them from others (Lim, 2016), South Koreans adopt a perception of the self that is influenced by their relationship with others. In this study, one current athlete-activist spoke out for the development of his sport group (e.g., Para-snowboard, wheelchair tennis) against KPC. However, his activism incurred negative outcomes (i.e., all group members were deemed as an impertinent) to his sport group from KPC board members in a vertical collectivism environment. Another athlete member of this group evaded him because they thought their group (*Woo-ri*) was reviled by his dogmatic behaviour. However, they also blamed him when he kept silent regarding social injustice issues for the group (*Woo-ri*) in spite of being a medallist. This contradictory feedback from peer athletes and KPC members led him to face identity dilemmas, oscillating between athlete-activist identity and collectivism identity. In other words, *Woo-ri* culture could lead to a stronger activist voice, but also people might be stuck on the frame of *Woo-ri* without further movement. As one current athlete said:

How do Koreans call this country? ‘Our country’. Our country... We’d like to call us ‘Woo-ri (we)’. We are a community that has a strong fence. Korean always calls themselves ‘we’. How about a foreign country? ‘You’, ‘He’, ‘She’, they call someone directly and firmly. We are different. We are just us. When talking, people would say ‘The damn guys are wrong’, rather than ‘He is wrong.’ Speaking bad, Koreans tend to generalise easily. So, if I do wrong, it is bundled up totally, not a personal area. I’m an athlete. If I do something wrong, people think, “All athletes are in the same way”, not thinking it as my problem. So, I must not speak in front of people. It has been rooted in Korea society for a long time. The word ‘we’ is used all the time even when we don’t recognize. So, I try to hide my voice, be far from people, and avoid being around them. What happens next? “He only knows himself”, “He never cares us”, “He does not want to speak for us”, people say [Current athlete, Yun-Young]

## Discussion

This study addressed the influence of Confucianism on disability activism from the perspectives on current disabled elite athletes and KPC members in Para-sport. This article contributes to the fields of sport sociology and Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP) by highlighting a new line and meaningful motivation-focused approaches of Para sport activism grounded in the unique cultural background of South Korea. Drawing on a CSP

1 approach, five cultural themes highlighted the significance of Confucian values in understanding athletes' and  
2 KPC members' attitudes and their relationship. CSP was an essential approach here because the South Korean  
3 traditional culture remains pertinent and transformative today. Based on our results, below we discuss the  
4 influence of Confucianism culture on Para-sport activism distinguishing the two perspectives of motivators and  
5 barriers.

6 All five Confucian factors positively influenced the activist intention of both disabled elite athletes and  
7 KPC members. On the one hand, disabled elite athletes were primarily encouraged by a high position in disability  
8 society and athlete-collectivism. This is remarkable because in the past (30 years ago) disabled athletes were  
9 perceived through the lenses of a medical model whereby they were regarded as 'flawed' and, therefore, were  
10 subordinated to non-disabled people. With regard to athlete-collectivism, athlete-activist could influence other  
11 potential athlete-activists (Smith et al., 2016). Various studies (Lim, 2009; Yeo, Wildman & Choi, 2017) found  
12 that Confucian harmony has two distinct motives in collectivistic Asian societies: a) appreciation of harmonious  
13 relationships (interpersonal trust), and b) harmony as a means to other ends (information sharing framework). For  
14 example, the South Korean ice sledge athletes exhibited their interpersonal trust when they collectively  
15 participated in the 2018 documentary film 'We ride a sled' aimed to raise awareness on disability rights and Para-  
16 sport. On the other hand, KPC members were mainly supported by position advantage, factionalism, and senior  
17 age factors. Plummer (2019) indicated that key people sitting at top hierarchical positions have extensive and  
18 pervasive dominant narrative power (e.g., accompanying legitimacy and credibility). By taking advantage of this  
19 power, KPC members focused on the instrumental advantage of their large network to lead social changes. For  
20 example, KPC negotiated with the Government to inaugurate 150 new public disability sports centres by 2025. In  
21 addition, in 2019 KPC achieved an agreement with the Korea Employment Agency for persons with Disabilities  
22 (KEAD) to create around 1,500 employments for disabled retired athletes.

23 However, the five Confucian factors also discouraged activist intentions. The strong Confucian culture,  
24 rooted in people's daily lifestyle, has led to a rejection of direct political and social action to change the disability  
25 culture in South Korea. In traditional Confucian philosophy, inter-class conflicts were attributable to lower-status  
26 groups being impolite and disrespectful. Therefore, KPC members were discouraged by those disabled athletes  
27 who assumed a hostile attitude towards these five Confucian factors. With the wave of human-rights movement  
28 in contemporary South Korean society its influence on modern generations (e.g., those of current disabled elite



athletes), Confucianism has weakened compared to that on older generations (e.g., those of KPC members). The formation of intergenerationality shows dichotomous cultural identities by two different generations and led to conflict and hostility for both groups in Para-sport. This tension is shaped by social hierarchy between athletes and KPC members. In South Korean Para-sport, social personality tended to be implicitly formed by coordination and harmony with a group (e.g., athletes' group) rather than individual social standards (Moon & Han, 2013). This led disabled elite athletes to develop dual personalities including an inner identity (e.g., activist or whistle-blower against unfair oppression in the hierarchy) and an outer identity (e.g., passive surrender by suppressing their real emotions and anger). This phenomenon, called '*Han*', which is defined as an uncontrollable emotional state of frustration caused by the cognitive appraisal of unfair discrimination and oppression (Choi, Haslett, & Smith, 2019), led disabled athletes to be silent on social injustice in the sports environment. As another example of social hierarchy in the relationship between athletes and their parents, the Confucian influence (e.g., children should follow parents' directions) and negative stereotypes (e.g., disability is conceived as a tragic medical problem) dominate disabled athletes for home-adjustment life by their parents' intention, whereas the Western rights-based paradigm primarily contributes to supporting disabled children's independence outside the home (Poon-McBrayer & McBrayer, 2014). This led disabled elite athletes' voices to be oppressed and often filtered through the views of their family members.

Notwithstanding the negative influence of Confucianism on disability sports society, Para-sport is a suitable context to promote disability activism in South Korea. In order to achieve social changes, cultural legacy can be used as a useful framework through a commonly shared vision and collaboration of athletes and KPC in South Korean Para-sport. In the case of disabled elite athlete sides, they can lead to societal and inspirational contributions of athlete-activism with a sociocultural legacy in disability society. We can culturally envisage three ways to amplify their influence on social change and the athlete-activism continuum. First, confrontational conflicts due to age hierarchy and corrupted factionalism among disabled elite athletes should be abated at least, and athletes should respect individual fairness to maintain the harmonious relationship that is congruent with the Confucian value of horizontal collectivism (Lim, 2009). Second, athletes should be more subjective to protect their rights from people who sit at higher-level in the Para-sport committee, rather than conformity to unfair cultural barriers. Third, building an athlete-parent relationship based on mutual respect, support, and trust is needed because parental influence is a cardinal value of Confucianism especially for disabled people (see Figure 1). In the case of KPC board member sides, the interaction with key people within dominant factions (e.g.,

1 politicians, disability organisations) can lead to political and practical movement with legal, institutional, and  
2 organisational legacy in a wider disability landscape. In order to collect more influential voices with athletes-  
3 platform, minimising friction between athletes and board members is necessary. In this regard, KPC members  
4 should lead emancipation from the closure of the traditional kin network and patronising attitude towards disabled  
5 athletes in Para-sport. One way to actualise this movement may be to create emotionally safe spaces for current  
6 and potential athlete-activist by respecting for athlete individual's voices regardless of any condition such as  
7 different factions and age gaps (Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Choi, Haslett, & Smith, 2019). In other words, activism  
8 led by the combined voices of inspirational athletes and powerful KPC members can serve as strong vanguard  
9 and leverage of disability activism in diverse dimension (e.g., from the stronger promotion of accessibility for and  
10 wider social inclusion of disabled persons) through establishing solidarity backed by legislations and policies in  
11 rights-based paradigm.

12         Taken together, the IPC strategy should be considered not only at the international level of Para-sport  
13 legacy but also at the cultural and national level to enhance the feasibility to promote disability activism through  
14 Para-sport. Given the complexity of understanding social attitudes, perception, and unique national culture  
15 intricacy, overlooking cultural subtleties can lead to unintended consequences of IPC visions in different ways.  
16 For example, You and Hwang (2018) indicated that South Korean disabled people's movement has undoubtedly  
17 made great advances in political legislation; however, the negative social and cultural perspectives of disability  
18 still remain lodged in the combined traditional and modern Confucianism era. From this perspective, the IPC  
19 strategy appears necessary to employ intersectionality of cultural approaches to critically examine the various  
20 access to social, economic, and infrastructural arrangements that affect access to activism and its influence on  
21 society (Haslett et al., 2020; Misener et al., 2016). In other words, the IPC strategy should resist international  
22 generalisation and be sensitive to the 'localised' interpretation with cultural subtlety and its spheres of influences.

23         Possible directions for future academic efforts also arise from this article. Despite the potential of  
24 readers to adopt something from this research to change their setting (i.e., transferability, see Smith, 2018), it is  
25 important to interrogate social values, political environment, institutional priorities, and cultural peculiarities for  
26 social change. First, different cultural perspectives of other East Asian countries on Para-sport activism should  
27 be considered. Some research found subtle differences bringing in big impact of Confucianism on social model  
28 among East Asian countries (Huang & Chang, 2017; Sleziak, 2014). Second, future research could consider

what types of activism disabled athletes prefer to participate in to achieve a better understanding of the multifaceted nature of activism and highlight their potential impact on society. Third, academic discussion on disability activism from a disability social models are needed to gain an understanding of the sociocultural background and movement in the South Korean context (e.g., You & Hwang, 2018). Some research introduced the Western social model of disability in South Korea (Kim, 2002; Lee, 2018). However, lack of theoretical approach and discourse on disability movement remain outside vigorous debate by factional tension, political rivalries, and cultural gaps in South Korea, which resulted in the stagnation of anachronistic perspectives towards disability based on a medical model (You & Hwang, 2018). Finally, future research in South Korea must not deny the cultural lens. The importance of Confucianism in South Korean history and culture is undeniable. Despite that South Koreans do not learn Confucianism theory at school anymore, Confucian philosophy is still the dominant social system as a basis for day-to-day lives. Culture has developed and transformed, but culture settings have relatively many variables holding back progress. In this regard, researchers should not shy away from considering how cultural values have shaped athletes' behaviours and activism orientation, especially in Confucian countries based on hierarchical cultures.

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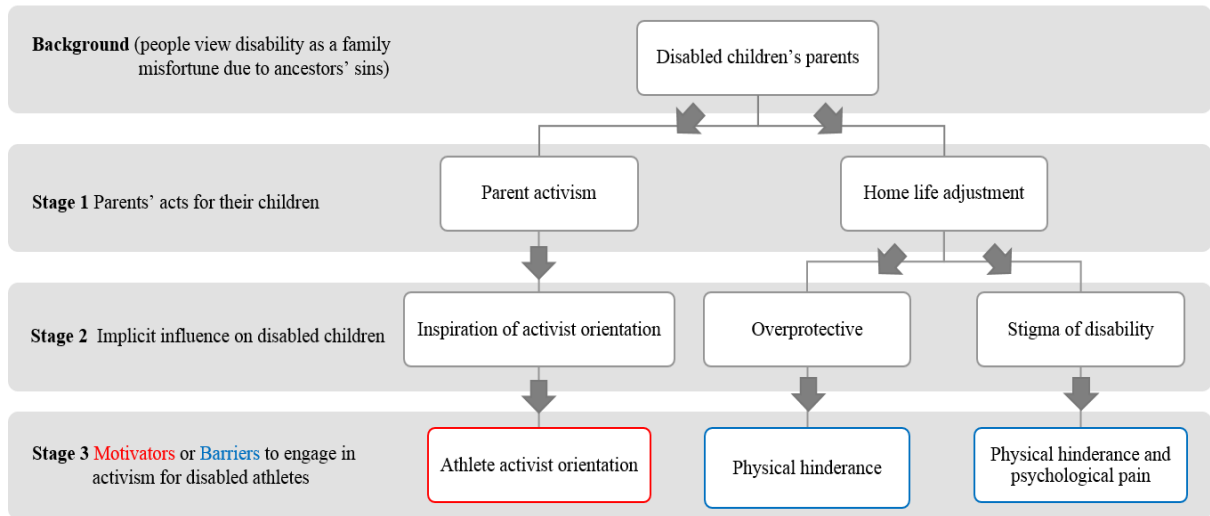
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**Table 1** Criteria employed to evaluate the methodological rigour of this qualitative study

Rigour criteria	Purpose	Strategies applied in the study to achieve rigour
Credibility	To establish confidence that the results are credible and plausible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We have provided in-depth descriptions of the data to show culturally-situated meaning and to capture people’s experiences (Tracy, 2010)</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We have demonstrated expansionistic depiction by showing the unfolding complexity of interpretations (Tracy, 2010)</li> </ul>
<i>Reflexivity</i>	To increase the confidence that findings result from the experiences of the participants rather than the preferences of the researcher.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We sought critical friends (e.g., academic colleagues, and peer-reviewers) to provide a theoretical sounding board (Smith &amp; McGannon, 2018). For example, we worked together to review (e.g., narrative indwelling) and refine themes (e.g., naming and re-categorising themes) by challenging cultural assumptions.</li> </ul>
<i>Resonance</i>	The degree to which the results can be meaningfully reverberated and transferred to other contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We have offered thick descriptions (e.g., interview quotes) and rich interpretation (e.g., enough contextual details) of the data that could be transferable to different situations or resonates with others in similar situations (e.g., naturalistic generalisability—make familiar connections to their own lives of readers, and provocative generalisability—provokes readers to rethink possibility which not yet in sight) (Smith, 2018)</li> <li>We provided diverse perspectives of significance (e.g., conceptually, culturally, practically, methodically, heuristically) to extend knowledge and generate ongoing research (Tracy, 2010)</li> </ul>
<i>Consistency</i>	To ensure the methodology employed in the study is consistent with the research process and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Study design with methodology and methods consistent with the clearly-stated philosophical assumptions which were adopted in informing research questions and data interpretation</li> </ul>

conclusion.



**Figure 1.** Journey of parents' influence on disabled elite athlete activism